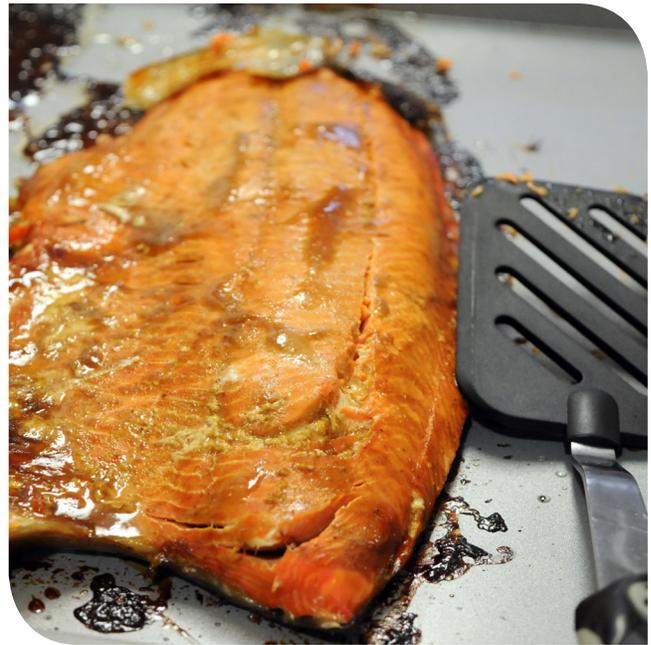


Increasing Indigenous Children's Access to Traditional Foods in Early Childhood Programs

Executive Summary

December 2016



Funded by:



In collaboration with:



BC **Aboriginal**
Child Care Society

Prepared for the Population and Public Health Program Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA)

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Acknowledgements:

A small leadership committee with members from the Resource Team, the First Nations Health Authority and Provincial Health Services Authority Indigenous Health provided guidance into the overall approach and content of the project. The project relied on the knowledge, time and expertise of a multi-stakeholder advisory with members from Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC, Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve, British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, Carrier Sekani Child and Family Services, First Nations Health Authority, Fraser Health, Interior Health, and Northern Health.

Cover photographs courtesy of BC Aboriginal Child Care Society.

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Suggested citation:

Provincial Health Services Authority. (2016). *Increasing Indigenous Children's Access to Traditional Foods in Early Childhood Programs*. Vancouver, B.C.: Provincial Health Services Authority, Population and Public Health Program.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Traditional Indigenousⁱ foods are part of a healthy diet. Moreover, traditional foods also have cultural and spiritual value and can contribute to the health of young First Nations and Métis children, many of whom experience food insecurity. Early childhood programs are ideal settings to introduce, explore and share traditional foods. However, in licensed childcare settings, the current food regulatory system effectively excludes the type, frequency and/or where traditional foods can be served.

The purpose of this project was to gain a better understanding of the circumstances that positively and negatively impact the use of high-protein (such as fish, shellfish and game) traditional foods in First Nations' and off-reserve early childhood programs (including group childcare and preschools) for Indigenous children from birth to age six. This collaborative project included stakeholders from diverse backgrounds including environmental health, food security, licensing, Aboriginal Head Start, child and family services, and public health.

This project builds on research conducted in 2012 by the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society and aligns with the work of the provincial *Early Years Resource: Healthy Eating and Physical Activity* project. Increasing access to healthy, safe food, including traditional food has also been identified as a key priority area of focus for healthy eating at the Ministry of Health. This project also fits into broader efforts by PHSAs' Population and Public Health Program and the BC Centre for Disease Control to increase collaboration between food security and food safety sectors at the local, regional and provincial levels.

Methodology

There were three phases to the project.

Phase one: Environmental scan and literature review

This first phase included scans of the policies and practices related to traditional food use in other jurisdictions across Canada; scans of the relevant literature with a focus on food safety; and a review of the British Columbia regulatory systems that impact the ability of early childhood programs to serve non-market foods.

ⁱ The term Indigenous and Aboriginal are used interchangeably throughout this report. In Canada, both terms are inclusive, referring to First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Specific terms like First Nations are used when appropriate and when referring to a program or community.

Phase two: Key informant interviews

The second phase involved 15 semi-structured key informant interviews with seven environmental health officers (EHOs), one licensing manager, three licensing officers (LOs), and four early childhood program personnel. Thirteen interviews took place over the phone, and two of the interviews with the LOs took place via e-mail. Key informants were selected based specifically on experience working in First Nations communities, their knowledge of/experience with traditional foods, and their experience working in (or with) early childhood centres. Based on the methods used for this project, the findings are not (and were not intended to be) a random sample or a representative sample of any of the sectors involved and, therefore, do not represent the views of an entire sector.

Phase three: Case studies

The final phase sought to build on, and deepen, the knowledge gained through phase two. It involved case studies in four communities where the researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with program managers and early childhood educators (ECEs) and spoke informally with Elders, parents and other community members.

Findings

Environmental scan and literature review

The environmental scan showed that non-market traditional foods are excluded from early childhood programs in most Canadian jurisdictions, with the exception of Nunavik. The literature review did not find any academic articles that directly addressed the safety of traditional foods in Canadian institutional settings, but did find that consumption of traditional foods was not associated with higher incidence of foodborne illness than consumption of many market foods. Foodborne illness connected to traditional foods can be linked predominantly to the consumption of raw or undercooked foods, fermented foods or cross-contamination from undercooked wild game. Traditional knowledge of Elders and traditional food preservation methods can make important contributions to improving food safety of traditional foods.

Key informant interviews

According to key informants, the most significant barrier to the use of traditional foods in early childhood programs for Indigenous children is the *Food Premises Regulation* requirement that foods must be from approved sources. Approved sources do not exist for most of the traditional foods. Key informants also noted the differing practices of First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) EHOs and regional health authority EHOs, as well as the regulatory environments in which they work. These different contexts impact the access of early childhood programs to non-market traditional foods. Another significant barrier was the lack of kitchens that meet food permit requirements, which are required for preparing both market foods and non-market foods.

Key informants suggested many changes to existing regulatory and inspection frameworks that could improve access to traditional foods. These suggestions helped inform the final options for consideration and supportive actions. Key informants emphasized the importance of collaboration and the need to recognize that First Nation Elders and traditional knowledge holders have traditional food safety knowledge and cultural protocols that ensure foods are safe for children.

Case studies

The community visits contrasted the circumstances for on-reserve and off-reserve programs. The off-reserve, licensed program had the most difficulty incorporating high-protein traditional foods. On the other hand, one First Nation is operating without a *Child Care Licensing Regulation (CCLR)* license. The children in the centre operating without a *CCLR* license are learning traditional ways from Elders, including how to: harvest traditional food; prepare food in traditional and non-traditional ways; and give thanks, share and eat traditional food.

The licensed and unlicensed programs that are successfully serving traditional foods take many steps to ensure the food is safe.

Discussion & options for consideration

The key informants and advisory committee of this project support exploring changes to the regulatory frameworks that guide the work of EHOs and LOs to give early childhood programs for Indigenous children improved access to non-market traditional foods. Successful programs in other jurisdictions demonstrate that traditional foods can be safely served in institutional settings. The literature review identified that in general, risks for foodborne illness are no greater with traditional foods than with market foods. Improving access to traditional foods in early childhood programs can also be viewed as part of the reconciliation process, and is an important step toward enhancing children's knowledge of their cultures and building their positive self-esteem as Indigenous peoples.

Based on the findings of this project, the following options intend to increase access to traditional foods in the early childhood setting:

1. Work with the Ministry of Health and the health authorities to explore developing a new set of food safety guidelines or standards specific to serving non-market high-protein and other traditional foods to children in Indigenous early childhood programs. The guideline development should include a strong engagement process that ensures collaboration with traditional food knowledge keepers and early childhood educators working in Indigenous contexts.
2. Explore sources of funding for building/equipping/renovating kitchens in Indigenous early childhood programs.
3. Once food safety guidelines/standards are developed for the early childhood setting, explore whether they can be adapted to other settings beyond childcare facilities.

“We want children to see, feel, smell, taste and hear their culture and language.”

– Early childhood educator

A number of supportive actions may help encourage broader access to non-market traditional foods in early childhood settings (see pg 25 of full report). The authors of the report recognize that much work still needs to be done to acknowledge and implement Indigenous rights.

Conclusion

Indigenous children in BC have a moral and legal right to the traditional foods that nourish their bodies and spirits. This includes consuming traditional foods, as well as learning from Elders and other knowledge keepers to harvest, prepare, give thanks and share the foods that are integral to their cultural heritage.

However, for Indigenous children in early childhood settings, access to traditional foods can be limited by a number of factors, particularly provincial food safety regulations that favour market foods. While many educators and health professionals working in this setting have found creative ways to increase access to traditional foods, the result is that levels of access differ greatly across the province.

A key tension uncovered by projects such as this is the struggle for Indigenous rights and government policy to operate in the same spaces. A first step to addressing access to traditional foods within the current regulatory framework is the development of a new set of guidelines specific to serving non-market traditional foods in early childhood programs. The guidelines would be developed collaboratively with Indigenous communities and led by professionals with a thorough understanding of First Nations, Aboriginal and Métis cultural values. The intent is that these guidelines can be adapted to other settings such as schools, hospitals and long-term care facilities. Moving forward, greater acknowledgement and attention needs to be given to traditional knowledge and Indigenous rights.